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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2017

TAGS: PREL PTER SY TU

SUBJECT: SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD VISIT TO ANKARA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROSS WILSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (c) Turkish Presidency/PM foreign affairs advisor Davutoglu told Ambassador October 17 that Turkey worked hard during President Assad's visit to persuade Syria to participate in the Middle East Peace conference planned for Annapolis in late November if it is invited.

¶2. (c) Assad and FM Muallem emphasized Syria's great reluctance to participate if the Golan Heights is not included on the agenda. The Syrians reportedly said they are not against the conference or against its focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but believe there should be a Syrian/Golan Heights track in the process, and not just a Palestinian one. They apparently indicated that the substance on this track can be thin or even relatively symbolic, but that its omission won't work.

¶3. (c) Davutoglu said that the Turks urged strongly against Syria isolating itself. It should not set unrealistic conditions on its participation, which is complicated enough.

The Syrians responded that they would not be the only regional Arabs not to attend the Annapolis conference. To Ambassador, Davutoglu urged the US not to freeze the Syrians out or give them too easy an excuse to boycott. For an Israeli-Palestinian process to work, Syria needs to be at least somewhat on board. If they're out, it maintains an Iranian-Syrian bloc against the Middle East Peace Process, and this should be in no one's interest. A broader conference will have the greatest chance of supporting progress and meeting the expectations that it will generate.

¶4. (c) Separately, the UK ambassador here reports that the Turks are still seriously trying to mediate between Israel and Syria. The content was unclear, and Davutoglu said nothing to us about this. The UK ambassador also noted that PM Erdogan will meet with PM Olmert during their separate visits to London next week.

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